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CONTENTS

Editorial	Page 1
Bible teaching about...	Page 3
The Wisdom of Solomon	Page 11
Important Bible Words	Page 20
What did Jesus Mean?	Page 25

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Editorial

BY THE TIME you read this, the UK will probably have a new Prime Minister. Near the end of his third term in office, Prime Minister Tony Blair said that he would retire in May 2007. After 10 years in office this might seem a natural change in the world of politics.

The changes in the leadership of countries are not always determined by the leaders themselves as other factors may govern these changes. An untimely death by natural causes or political revolution can alter the whole political spectrum in some countries and with it the aims and direction of a nation completely. The recent death of the former Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, has reminded us of the amazing way that the grip of Communism was ended in that vast country by this man who took over the political leadership at a critical time. The point we want to emphasise to our readers is that these events are not just chance happenings. It is the prophet Daniel who tells us clearly in the Bible that *'...the Most High God rules in the kingdom of men, and appoints over it whomever he chooses'* [Daniel 5. 21].

The first appointment of Mr George W. Bush as the President of the United States of America was probably the closest run election result ever seen, when either contestant could have emerged victorious. As Bible students, we can see in this Divine selection at work. In the American election, we see how a man can gain power by a very small margin. By contrast, in the UK we see a man elected over the past ten years by a large majority. But it makes no difference, the **'Most High God'** wanted these men to be world leaders at a critical time in world history.

After President Bush began his first term in office, Al-Qaeda launched a worldwide campaign of terrorism against Western nations, but its main aim was the destruction of the tiny nation of Israel. The terrible destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and other terror attacks had the effect of bringing together in a coalition, the USA and the UK. The leaders of these two countries could see that, not only were their own peoples threatened by this wave of terrorism, but that Israel was really the target. Iraq under Saddam Hussein was already bent on Israel's destruction and the USA-UK coalition was not going to allow that to happen so they launched their invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. While many critics have put forward their opinions about these wars, it is clear to Bible students that the hand of God is at work to preserve the tiny nation of Israel in their land until the return of Jesus Christ to the earth.

It is also clear from Bible prophecy that Israel will be attacked at some time in the future. It may be that Israel's friends, or whoever is in power then, will hesitate to protect them, but that in turn may make the Jewish people look to Jesus for their salvation, the Messiah they once rejected as foretold by the prophets of Israel: *'then they will look on me whom they have pierced'* [Zechariah 12.10: John 19.37]. Zechariah chapter 14 contains a detailed prophecy about the way in which God is drawing the nations together for the final terrible conflict which will be fought in the land of Israel: *'Behold, the day of the LORD is coming...I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem...the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations...the LORD shall be King over all the earth'* [Zechariah 14.1,3,9].

Jesus said to his followers, *'Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near'* [Luke 21.28].

Are you watching? – will you be ready?

Ken Dennis
Kent, UK

Bible teaching about...

The Nature of Christ

THE 'NATURE' OF a person or being may either refer to their physical or to their mental characteristics. For example the physical nature of fish and birds are very different: they differ in the make-up of their bodies and in their abilities and limitations. The Apostle Paul wrote:

'All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fish, and another of birds' [1 Corinthians 15.39].

On the other hand we also speak of someone being '*good natured*' or put their behaviour down to '*human nature*'. In this sense we refer to the mental or moral nature of a person. In either case, physical or mental 'nature' refers to the inherent characteristics with which a person is born. To understand the Bible's teaching about the nature of Christ, we must first briefly consider the nature of God and compare this with human nature.

THE NATURE OF GOD

By examining passages throughout the Bible we can build up a very clear picture of the nature of God. In physical terms He is:

- Eternal, living for ever, without beginning or end;
- All-powerful, having unlimited abilities;
- Able to see all things, having unlimited vision.

In mental terms God has:

- Unlimited knowledge, knowing all things;
- Complete wisdom, unbounded intellect.

The moral nature of God was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai:

‘...The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation’ [Exodus 34.6,7].

Elsewhere we also learn that God cannot lie and that He cannot be tempted by evil or Himself does not tempt anyone. In summary, physically and mentally God is unlimited in every way and morally he is absolutely good.

THE NATURE OF MAN

The Bible’s teaching on the nature of mankind is borne out by experience. Physically man is:

- Mortal, having no existence before conception in the womb and bound to die, generally within a short time period of one hundred years;
- Very limited in his abilities, restricted to the actions and movements he can perform with his body;
- Prone to disease and injury;
- Dependant upon a regular intake of food, water and oxygen to enable him to live;
- Dependant upon environmental conditions such as light, temperature and pressure.

Physically, man is greatly inferior to God and very similar to the animals. Mentally man is stronger than the animals but still much weaker than God. Man has:

- Limited knowledge, only what information he can acquire by experience or communication, and he forgets most of what he learns;

- Weak and faulty intellect, restricted by poor concentration and imagination.

Morally man is naturally evil, the direct opposite of God. Man always seeks to satisfy his own desires and to promote his own importance, even when it means disobedience to God, which the Bible calls sin. Jesus described man's moral nature in this way:

'But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies' [Matthew 15.18-19].

Temptations to sin naturally spring up in our minds, but we do not always give in to them, either in fear of the consequences or by strength of moral conscience. However, there is no man or woman that does not sin, as Paul wrote to the Romans: '*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*' [Romans 3.23].

CHRIST'S PHYSICAL NATURE

During Christ's life on Earth, he was physically no different from other men and women. It is written in Hebrews:

'Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same... Therefore, in all things he had to be made like his brethren...' [Hebrews 2.14,17].

Jesus was born of a woman in the normal way, although his conception was miraculous. As the angel Gabriel declared to his mother Mary, she conceived by the action of God's power upon her.

Since Jesus died it is clear that he was mortal. We can also learn from the gospels that he experienced hunger and thirst, was injured and

suffered. The mental pressure he endured told on him physically as Isaiah prophesied: '*...his visage was marred more than any man, And his form more than the sons of men...He has no form or comeliness; And when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him*' [Isaiah 52.14, 53.2].

In one aspect Jesus was physically different from other men - he had the power to do miracles and to perceive the thoughts of other people. However, there is no evidence that he had these powers in his early life, but he received the Holy Spirit, God's power, as an adult at his baptism. He was not unique in this; the Bible tells us about others who were also given superhuman abilities like those of Jesus.

So although Jesus had those abilities, they were not part of his nature: they were supernatural powers given to him by God. At birth he was physically no different from other men.

CHRIST'S MENTAL NATURE

We can observe from the gospel records that Jesus was very intelligent, and had an exceptional knowledge and understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures. This was apparent even in childhood, when at twelve years of age he was able to discuss the Bible with the learned scholars of the day.

However, there is no reason to think that these mental abilities were superhuman. They can be developed by constantly applying the mind to the Word of God, as we read in the Psalms:

'Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. You, through your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; For they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, For your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, Because I keep your precepts' [Psalm 119.97-100].

Although Jesus had great knowledge, he did not have unlimited knowledge like God. In referring to the time of his second coming he said, '*But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*' [Mark 13.32].

CHRIST'S MORAL NATURE

The moral nature of Christ is more difficult to understand. The quotation above from Hebrews tells us that '*In all things he had to be made like his brethren*,' - but did that include having the human tendency to sin? Another passage from Hebrews provides the answer:

'For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but [Jesus] was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin' [Hebrews 4.15].

The Gospels record some of the temptations Jesus experienced, such as when he was in the wilderness for forty days. On that occasion he resisted the temptations, as he did throughout his life. Jesus was '*like his brethren*' even in his moral nature, in having a natural tendency to sin. But he is unique in that he never did sin, that he was able to overcome that nature by the strength of his conscience.

A UNIQUE MAN

What made Jesus unique? Why did he apply his mind to the Word of God so much? Why did he have the strength of conscience to overcome every temptation to sin?

The one fundamental thing that sets Jesus apart from the rest of mankind was his character. We have already referred to the declaration of God's character made to Moses - his mercy, goodness and truth etc. The character of Jesus was a perfect image of that of God, as the Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians: '*He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation*' [Colossians 1.15].

In the book of Exodus, God's character is described as his glory, and Paul told the Corinthians that the same glory is reflected in the character of Jesus: *'For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'* [2 Corinthians 4.6].

All men and women can partially reflect the character of God, so we too can sometimes resist temptation by strength of conscience. It is possible, and indeed our duty as disciples of Christ, to develop a more godly character, as Paul wrote, *'...be transformed by the renewing of your mind...'* [Romans 12.2] and again, *'But we all... beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory...'* [2 Corinthians 3.18].

Only Jesus perfectly reflected God's character, and did so from birth. Because Jesus was conceived in Mary by the power of God, he was both the Son of Man and the Son of God. He inherited from his mother human nature, both physically and mentally, including the tendency to sin, but he also inherited from his Father His perfect character.

Although he had this character from birth, it was only by reading God's Word and by experiencing temptation that he developed the strength of character to overcome sin completely. So we read in the letter to the Hebrews, *'...though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered'* [Hebrews 5.8].

The strength of his internal conflict with sin is shown powerfully in the moments before he was arrested to stand trial and be crucified. In the garden of Gethsemane he prayed to God in extreme anguish that he might be spared the bitter suffering that was soon to come. The temptation to disobey God's will and escape the horrible ordeal must have been overpowering, yet he never wavered. His conscience held

firm as he prayed: '*...nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done*' [Luke 22.42].

A CHANGE IN NATURE

So far we have only considered the nature of Christ at the time of his life on Earth. Three days after his death he was raised to a new life and his nature was entirely changed. His resurrection was a rebirth - he was '*the firstborn from the dead*' [Colossians 1.18; Revelation 1.5]. This second time he was not born of a woman, the Son of Man, but was born entirely of God, as the Apostle Paul said:

'God...has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: "You are my Son, Today I have begotten you"' [Acts 13.33].

At his resurrection Jesus was begotten (born) of God alone, and so he inherited God's divine nature instead of human nature. His human nature was destroyed by his death on the cross, and because he had overcome sin completely, he was set free from temptation.

'...Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over him. For the death that he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life that he lives, he lives to God' [Romans 6.9, 10].

'So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power

[1 Corinthians 15.42,43]

Jesus is no longer subject to temptation, nor is he bound by any of the physical and mental weaknesses of human nature.

HOPE FOR US

The good news for us is that we too can have our nature changed, if we believe the Word of God and follow His commands. When Jesus returns to the Earth, God will raise the responsible dead, and if found worthy, those who are Christ's will undergo a change of nature:

‘Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God...Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep [*i.e. die*], but we shall all be changed — in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality’ [*1 Corinthians 15.50-53*].

God has enabled us to associate ourselves with Christ's victory over his sinful nature. We must endeavour to overcome our own sinful lusts, although we cannot entirely succeed and must have faith in God and Jesus Christ. God will graciously overlook our short-comings and grant us to share the prize Jesus won, the change to divine nature, as Peter wrote: ‘...that...you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust’ [*2 Peter 1.4*].

Therefore a proper understanding of the nature of Christ is essential to understand the salvation offered by God in the Bible. Without it we cannot explain why Jesus died or why his death should save us. He had to have human nature so that he could overcome it, destroying the power of sin by his sinless life and his sacrificial death.

Nigel Neate
Nottingham, UK

The Wisdom of Solomon (2)

THE WORLD APPEARS to be in a spiral of ever increasing turmoil in one way or another. Much of this turmoil is triggered by competing ideologies which not only cause friction between nations, but also within individual societies. These competing philosophies and values are in many ways irreconcilable. Thus, how can society and individuals decide what is really of value? What is valued depends upon what society believes to be good, right, desirable and worthy of emulation by others. What an individual values is influenced by society, their own characteristics and their personal desires.

Society is of course composed of individuals and life is often viewed from the perspective of what we as individuals value, what we want. But this really is a self orientated perspective and one that underlies many of the ills that beset society.

The intention of this second article is to focus upon individuals and take a personal perspective about values. The person that we are, our morals and our personal values, inevitably have a resulting impact upon others and ultimately upon our own personal future.

What answer would you give to somebody who asked 'What value does your life have?' Even asking such a question generates an uncomfortable feeling. For all the things we value and for all our achievements - of what importance are they when we die? At this point the only remaining question is of what value are we? Has our life had any value?

TWO PATHS

Two paths of life are defined in Scripture - the path of wisdom

and the path of folly. Solomon in Proverbs brings the different attributes of wisdom and folly to life by a method known as personification.

We can define personification as a figure of speech by which abstract ideas and concepts are given human characteristics or qualities. In the Scriptures, personification is often used to paint word pictures that help us to more fully understand concepts and ideas that otherwise might be difficult to fully appreciate.

With the wisdom given to him by God, Solomon highlights the path to finding that which is of true and lasting value. It is only by learning the wisdom that God has revealed in His Word that we find the true meaning and value of life. Thus Solomon in Proverbs draws a stark contrast between wisdom and folly. There are six Hebrew words in the original text of the book of Proverbs translated by the word 'wisdom' (NKJV).

<i>Chokmah</i>	wisdom or prudence
<i>Chokmowth</i>	wisdom or sound knowledge
<i>Tuwshiyah</i>	Sound wisdom
<i>Leb</i>	Wisdom, understanding, knowledge, thinking, reflection, determination (of will) and conscience
<i>Sekel</i>	wisdom, prudence, insight, understanding

Another Hebrew word, '*Muwcar*', is sometimes found with wisdom and means instruction, discipline and correction. The combination of these words suggests that wisdom encompasses all aspects of an individual's character and that wisdom is a hard won quality of character and mind.

FOLLY PERSONIFIED

Solomon examines the attributes of wisdom in Proverbs 9.1-13 then the attributes of folly in verses 13-18. For the purposes of this

article we will discuss folly first to draw a contrast between the two concepts. Solomon personifies folly as a woman:

'A foolish woman is clamorous; she is simple, and knows nothing. For she sits at the door of her house, on a seat by the highest places of the city, to call to those who pass by, who go straight on their way: Whoever is simple, let him turn in here'

[Proverbs 9.13-16].

The foolish lack knowledge and are easily led into the wrong paths: *'The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none who does good'* [Psalm 14.1]. Such is the state of the modern world; we live in an atheistic society that refuses to accept that there is a Creator. The state of modern society clearly shows the results of godlessness and seeking those things which temporarily satisfy human desire, but in the end are of no lasting value. For all the ambition and achievement that may satisfy human desire, of what value are they when we die?

The woman folly cries out to tempt those who pass by: *'And as for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, 'Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant'. But he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of hell.'* [Proverbs 9.16-18]. The natural state of man is mortal and without seeking the wisdom of God then death is his ultimate end.

THE ATTRIBUTES OF FOLLY

The Hebrew word for 'fool' conveys the idea of somebody easily led, gullible and silly. The most common Hebrew word - 'Kesil', signifies one who is dull and obstinate in the sense of a man's chosen outlook rather than his mental capacity. The Hebrew word 'Ewil' also conveys a sense of knowing no restraint and the word 'Nabel' is well personified in Nabal of whom Abigail said *'For as is name is so is he:*

Nabal is his name and folly is with him'. [1 Samuel 25.25]. Thus the woman called 'folly' in Proverbs displays the principle of sin that drives men and women along a self seeking path in opposition to God and His ways. James wrote:

'...each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.' [James 1:14-15]

We read in contrast that *'Wisdom is in the sight of him that has understanding, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth.'* [Proverbs 17.24] As we noted at the beginning of this article, the world faces ever increasing turmoil and uncertainty, yet people look to the 'ends of the earth', seeking answers from human ideologies, rather than looking for the answers where they have always been – in the Word of God. Thus the foolish die for want of wisdom, yet as the Hebrew word 'Kesil' implies it is their own choice.

WISDOM PERSONIFIED

In contrast to folly, wisdom is also personified as a woman who calls out her invitation for all to hear:

'She takes her stand on the top of the high hill, beside the way, where the paths meet. She cries out by the gates, at the entry of the city, at the entrance of the doors: 'To you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of men. O you simple ones, understand prudence, and you fools, be of an understanding heart. Listen, for I will speak of excellent things, and from the opening of my lips will come right things' [Proverbs 8.2-6]

Wisdom has existed from the beginning: *'The LORD possessed me*

at the beginning of his way, before his works of old.' [Proverbs 8.22] - wisdom's voice is ignored at our peril!

THE ATTRIBUTES OF WISDOM

Solomon wrote: *'Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars'* [Proverbs 9:1]. Here we have presented to us a solid foundation upon which to build our lives, wisdom says: *'The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate'* [Proverbs 8.13]. Wisdom presents opposing attributes to those of folly, those who seek God and desire to build their lives upon a solid foundation will reject all that is evil.

'Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom; I am understanding...I love those who love me, And those who seek me diligently will find me...I traverse the way of righteousness, In the midst of the paths of justice...' [Proverbs 8.14,17, 20].

The attributes of wisdom include knowledge, discretion, counsel, sound judgement, understanding, power, righteousness and justice. Although wisdom does not hide herself, we must make every effort to respond to her call. The path of wisdom makes demands, it makes no promise of an easy life, rather on the contrary wisdom warns of a 'straight and narrow way' and a denial of self.

Solomon writes about the reward for diligently seeking out and having a love for the attributes of wisdom:

'...incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; Yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God.' [Proverbs 2.2-5].

Note the repetition of ideas, of being willing to listen, application, crying out, seeking and searching for righteousness, in other words making an effort!

FINDING WISDOM

Now Jeremiah records, *'O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps'*. [Jeremiah 10.23] and further, *'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?'* [Jeremiah 17.9]. An honest review of mans history, the turmoil in the world, the friction between nations and people, plus the self seeking and pride that characterises individual attitudes, will show the unquestionable truth of these words.

All the problems that beset mankind have their roots in godlessness and following the path of folly. Thus mankind is in great need of learning the knowledge of God, revering His ways and learning the attributes of wisdom that will be a guide to the path of righteousness.

Mankind cannot find an answer to global problems such as pollution, global warming, famine and war. We cannot resolve social problems nor can we change our own nature and mortality. A change of attitude and perspective is urgently needed before it is too late. Indeed David prayed to God saying: *'...teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom'* [Psalm 90.12].

Life is brief; it does us well to remember that our lives are finite and will sooner or later end with an utter futility and finality unless there has been some inner change of character that has given our life some value in the sight of God. So, if our life is to have some value how do we find the path to wisdom? Solomon gives the answer:

'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding' [Proverbs 9.10].

If we heed Solomon's advice, it will teach us to recognise God's great power, His love and His mercy. It will engender in us recognition of our true position, the need for His forgiveness and of our own frailty. Fear in a Biblical sense means to have reverence, respect and piety. Reverence develops knowledge and teaches us not to rely upon ourselves, on status, on possessions, or upon anything that this world has to offer. Respect teaches us to have humility and to rely upon God unlike the foolish who say:

'With our tongue we will prevail; our lips are our own; who is Lord over us?' [Psalm 12.4]

Yet of the wise we read:

'Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; Teach a just man, and he will increase in learning.'

[Proverbs 9.8, 9]

A humble willingness to learn and to heed instruction will promote the growth of a sincere love for God, a love of divine principles and ways, a love for the attributes of God and for those who try to conform to His principles. Now we read that '*The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life*' [Proverbs 14.27]. This brings to mind some words of Jesus, who said:

'.. whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life' [John 4:14].

None can drink of that living spiritual water unless they have the right attitude of mind; fear and reverence of God, humility and a willingness to learn. Only through the Lord Jesus Christ can salvation be found and Paul wrote that in him '*are hid all the treasures of*

wisdom and knowledge' [Colossians 2.3]. Therefore, only by accepting the wisdom of God and being baptised into the saving name of Jesus can we be saved, as Paul reminded:

'you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God - and righteousness and sanctification and redemption' [1Corinthians 1.30].

But perhaps the greatest act of wisdom is portrayed in those words of Solomon: '*Wisdom has built her house, She has hewn out her seven pillars*' [Proverbs 9.1]. This brings our thoughts to the purpose of God as revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ:

'Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are' [1Corinthians 3.16, 17].

The house of God is founded upon and built by wisdom, his unsearchable wisdom and supreme knowledge. Jesus is both King and High Priest over that house of God, which is a living temple, a building consisting of those who have sought the wisdom of God and put it into practice within their daily lives. He views them as rare jewels and of great value in His sight as we read in Malachi:

'Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on his name. "They shall be mine" says the LORD of hosts, "on the day that I make them my jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him"' [Malachi 3.16, 17].

CONCLUSION

Wisdom says, *'By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, all the judges of the earth'* [Proverbs 8.15, 16]. If only mankind had rulers who sought and followed the wisdom of God, how different the world would be! Yet this is exactly what God has promised. A ruler, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will reign with absolute wisdom and according to the Law of God. Those counted as being wise and who constitute the 'precious jewels' of God will be granted life in His Kingdom on earth.

So what is the value of your life?

Andy Peel
Northampton, UK

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The Bible Correspondence Course is in two parts. The first part gives a basic outline of what the Bible contains and its message. The second part is a more detailed study of the important Bible teaching concerning God's plan of salvation and the Christian way of life. The course is free of charge and the first lesson can be obtained by writing to:

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Important Bible Words

Grace

THE MESSAGE OF the Bible runs like a golden thread from the first book – Genesis to the last book – Revelation. There are many different ways that the message can be studied. For example we can read about the men and women whose lives are recorded in the Bible. We can examine the teaching of individual writers who wrote under Divine inspiration - such as Moses, David, Solomon, the prophets and Apostles and most important of all – the teaching of Jesus. This article is the first of a series dealing with important Bible words that can help us understand its teaching concerning God's plan of salvation.

In this article, we shall be attempting to answer a few simple, yet vital questions - what is **'grace'**? Why is it important? How do we get it? How do we keep it? What are we going to do about it? The word appears in the King James translation of the Bible no less than 1,769 times, which gives us an indication of just how crucial **'grace'** is to all those trying to follow Jesus.

The first occurrence of the word is in the first book of the Bible. *'But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD'* [Genesis 6.8] and the last occurrence is in the final verse of the Bible: *'The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen'* [Revelation 22. 21]. This shows us again just how important the theme of **'grace'** is to readers of God's Word since it is mentioned throughout the book.

WHAT IS GRACE?

If we look in a dictionary, various definitions will be given, but the one that best sums it up is **'undeserved kindness'**. In the UK, we

sometimes hear the phrase '*grace and favour*' being used in connection with the Royal Family. Sometimes, after a life of service to the Queen, a servant is given a '*grace and favour*' house or apartment to live in. This suggests that they didn't deserve to be rewarded in this way, whereas it could be seen as a reward for a lifetime of service. The phrase is used because the house was not part of the Queen's contract with that servant, but was given over and above what the servant was entitled to, making it '*undeserved*'.

WHY IS GRACE IMPORTANT?

The importance of '**grace**' cannot be underestimated. Without '**grace**' we cannot be saved, it is as simple as that. We cannot earn salvation. We cannot be worthy. We cannot merit eternal life. The Scriptures say:

'for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God being justified freely by his **grace** through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' [*Romans 3.23,24*].

Therefore we do not deserve eternal life because we sin, but God has been merciful to us and given us the opportunity to obtain everlasting life through the sacrifice of Jesus who died for our sins. Because our debts have been paid for by the blood of Jesus, the Scriptures say we can be justified and because it did not cost **us** anything, it says we can be justified freely.

If someone gives us something freely (or for nothing), then it is a gift. If we have earned something through our own actions, then it would be like wages.

'For by **grace** you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.' [*Ephesians 2.8, 9*]

This idea is summed up in the following verse:

‘For the wages of sin *is* death, but the gift of God *is* eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord’ [*Romans 6.23*].

The teaching of Scripture is quite clear - the only thing we can earn through our own actions is death. And the only way we can achieve eternal life is because God gives it to us as a gift.

HOW DO WE OBTAIN GRACE?

In a way, we’ve already answered this question. We cannot earn it, we cannot win it. We can only be given it by God. However, God does not extend His ‘**grace**’ where it is not wanted. Our Creator gives it to those who earnestly seek Him, to those who have faith in Him and to those who try to obey Him.

So faith is important - it encompasses belief in God and the things that He has promised:

‘But without faith it is impossible to please him, for he that comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him’ [*Hebrews 11.6*].

Faith is something that we have to cultivate if we want to please God. Not everyone has a faith that can move mountains, but we must work with what we are given to make it grow. Jesus shows us this in his teaching contained in the parable of the talents (*see Matthew chapter 25 verses 14 to 30*). Some have more to start with and some less. Those servants are not punished for this but rather praised, for working with what they have and making it grow. The servant who is punished is the one who does nothing except bury the talent underground. If we bury our faith in the same way, then it is obviously dead and will not bring about an increase. The Apostle James puts it like this:

‘You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only...For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also’.

[James 2.24,26]

In other words, if we believe or have faith in our Saviour Jesus Christ, we will **want** to do the works that show our faith is alive.

HOW DO WE KEEP GRACE?

One of the mistakes made by many Christians is to believe in the ‘*once saved, always saved*’ concept. This is not taught in the Bible and anyone who accepts Jesus as their Saviour but then effectively turns their back on him or who allows other things such as careers, relationships, etc to take priority over their faith, is in for a big shock on Judgement day! Even those making a big show of their faith, doing lots of high-profile things – but doing them for the wrong reasons or in the wrong spirit is also in danger of losing their grip on the great ‘*prize*’ as it is sometimes referred to in the Bible.

Even the Apostle Paul, with all the great things he did in the name of Jesus, still had to ‘*carry on carrying on*’. As he puts it in one of his letters:

‘I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus’ [Philippians 3.14 AV].

Believers are in a ‘**state of grace**’ and if we continue, then we will be saved, in the words of Jesus:

‘...he who endures to the end will be saved.’

[Matthew 10.22]

There is no doubt at all that Jesus has done his part - as a once and for all offering for sin - but we have to do **our part**, ‘*patient continuance in doing good*’ [Romans 2.7].

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT GRACE?

Now that we understand a little about God's undeserved kindness towards us, what are we going to **do about it**? Is it just an intellectual exercise? Do we feel that no action is required? Or are we going to examine our lives and make sure that we are walking in the right direction? If you have not yet committed yourself to Jesus, then what are you waiting for? The Apostle Paul was asked this very question before his conversion:

'And now why are you waiting? Arise be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord' [*Acts 22.16*].

We can teach you the basic truths of the Bible so necessary for salvation and also baptise you when the time is right. If you have committed your life to Christ, you need to ask yourself whether your priorities are right – are you seeking first the Kingdom, that is, putting Jesus first? [*Matthew 6.33*] Are you meeting regularly with fellow Bible-believers? [*Hebrews 10.25*] Are you regularly studying God's Word [*2 Timothy 3.15,16*] Are you trying to live by it? [*Matthew 4.4; 1 Peter 1.23*]

Remember! None of these things will earn you salvation, but if you aren't doing them, what does it tell you about your faith [*James 2:26*] Is it a living faith that is a central part of your life, or is it an academic faith that only deals in theories, not realities, or one that only comes out on Sundays?

Only you can answer these questions for yourself and only you can do something about it if you need to make adjustments in your life. God's **grace** is freely available if we truly desire to seek him. Don't miss this opportunity, but rather turn to God while there is still time.

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What did Jesus Mean?

‘You are my friends if ...’

IF IS ONLY a little word, and yet it makes so much difference to the meaning of that saying of Jesus, *‘You are my friends, if you do whatever I command you’* [John 15.14].

Jesus was here talking to his disciples. He knew that it was only going to be a matter of hours before he was arrested and he would have to face death at the hands of the authorities, both Jewish and Roman. His followers would have to face the future without his physical presence and he went on to reassure them. He said: *‘everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you’* [John 15.15 NIV].

The things which Jesus had learned from his Father were a set of rules for this life. They are not only rules for this life but to lead us to eternal life, because earlier Jesus had told Nicodemus: *‘...God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.’* [John 3.16]. We can have that same invitation to become friends of Jesus and to share eternal life with him under the same conditions if we do whatever Jesus commands.

Through Jesus, God has made us an offer of something far greater than this life. If we are going to take Him up on His offer though, we have to read the instructions and abide by them. If we buy a new computer or other piece of equipment we must read the instruction manual first. We might think that a set of instructions for life would have to be vastly more complicated than those for a computer, but they are all contained in the Bible and that not only includes the instructions but also many stories used as illustrations and examples. Jesus’

instructions are not difficult to keep as he told his followers:

‘Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light’

[Matthew 11.28-30].

If we look at these instructions Jesus gave to his followers found in the Bible, we will find a code of conduct and ethics that makes a lot of sense for a peaceful and successful life now. More importantly, it has the immeasurably greater advantage of qualifying us for that promise of ‘*everlasting life*.’ Jesus expanded the point and introduced another vital concept when he instructed his followers to ‘*go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved*’ [Mark 16.15,16 NIV].

In the Gospel of Matthew we read of an occasion when Jesus was asked by an expert in the Jewish law which was the greatest commandment. His reply was just as appropriate to us now, two thousand years later, as it was then:

‘... You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets [Matthew 22.37- 40].

Here Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy, one of the books of Moses, which stresses the concept of a total commitment to God based on love and respect rather than fear and dread that was and still is a feature of pagan ideas of religion. That same love and commitment must be reciprocated. If we demonstrate our love for Jesus, then he has

promised us the love of God in return, in words that link with the title of this article:

‘He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest (show) myself to him....If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him’ [John 14.21, 23].

God has promised that if we really do love him with that total commitment we shall receive a tangible reward. That reward is a place in the kingdom of God and it is in that kingdom that we shall experience the ultimate fulfilment of the promise of Jesus who also said: ‘*I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also*’ [John 14.3]. Jesus said that to love God was the most important of all the commandments, but he also said that the second command is like it: ‘*you shall love your neighbour as yourself*’ [Mark 12.31].

Jesus himself demonstrated the greatest example of this love for others in his own sacrifice. He told his disciples shortly before he was arrested and crucified: ‘*...love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for his friends*’ [John 15.12, 13]. Then Jesus spoke the words which form the basis of this article: ‘*You are my friends if you do whatever I command you*’ [John 15.14].

Many of Jesus’ commands were given or illustrated in the form of parables, stories that had a hidden meaning. Perhaps the best known of these illustrates this concept of unselfishness and service to others. Luke records the parable of the Good Samaritan and when Jesus finished making the point that we must take every available opportunity to help others, he told his hearers to ‘*go and do likewise*’ [Luke 10.37].

In addition to the Good Samaritan there are many more parables

of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, covering almost every aspect of life. Those who want to be the friends of Jesus are told that we must not be afraid to live by the Word of God and to show our obedience to him by our way of life. We are to be sure of our grounding in the faith by building our lives on the bedrock of the Bible. We are warned to be ready for Jesus to return at any moment, to set up the kingdom of God on earth. We are assured of God's mercy at the judgement that comes before the reward promised to the friends of Jesus, if we continue to obey his simple instruction, '*You are my friends if...*'

Real Christianity means following Jesus and to do this we must believe what he believed and obey his teachings. Jesus makes us an offer of being much more than just followers - we can be his friends, but in order to claim that friendship we must learn what he expects of those friends, and then follow his instructions. It is no use thinking we can be Christians without that knowledge and obedience and it is no use expecting the Christian reward without first living a Christian life. Jesus has issued the invitation and has shown us the way. In one of his parables Jesus describes the time of his return when men and women from all nations will be brought before him for judgement. Those who are found approved will hear these wonderful words from the lips of the one who truly is their saviour and their friend:

'Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world' [Matthew 25.34].

The kingdom of God and our places in that kingdom are a gift from God - **if** we show Him in our way of life that we are the friends of Jesus now.

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The Christadelphians (Dawn Fellowship) believe the Bible (Old and New Testaments) to be the wholly inspired and infallible Word of God. Its principal theme is the salvation of mankind through the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the setting up of the kingdom of God under his rulership when he returns to the earth.

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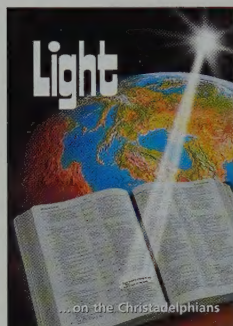
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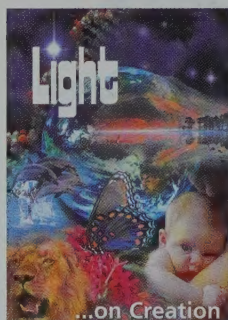
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